

Achieving Results Permanency



GOAL: Provide stable, nurturing, and permanent placements as quickly as possible for children who are placed into out-of-home care

He weighed one pound and tested positive for cocaine at birth. His mother visited him periodically for the first few weeks and then one day she just stopped coming. Devin's mother has never been found and his father has never been identified.

He was placed into a foster home that specialized in the care of special needs children. Devin spent many of his first few months of life at Children's Hospital receiving emergency respirator treatment for his underdeveloped lungs. He is behind in every stage of his development, requiring oxygen at night and a feeding tube. He was diagnosed as physically and mentally handicapped. Despite every medical prediction, by 17 months Devin learned to sit up, reach for toys, make eye contact and smile, *a lot!*

Once his biological parent's rights were terminated and Devin was declared "legally free," a nationwide search convened to find a family for Devin. While calls came in from as far away as Florida, Devin's medical needs were more than most families were prepared to address.

In February, a woman called saying she had met Devin and his foster mother while waiting in a doctor's office with her own children. She and her husband had two children of their own and had always wanted to adopt a special needs child. She was captivated by Devin from the moment she first saw him. She and her husband began the foster/adopt process immediately and completed all the steps necessary to become licensed for placement. The father is a respiratory therapist who was more than equipped to address Devin's nighttime oxygen needs and it just happens that the mother is a physical therapist. In the year since his placement, Devin's motor skills have improved dramatically. To everyone's delight, he is walking! Devin's home is filled with books and toys, a friendly cat, the smell of cookies and coffee, hugs and smiles and most importantly the genuine love of a family that the little boy who nobody wanted can call his very own.

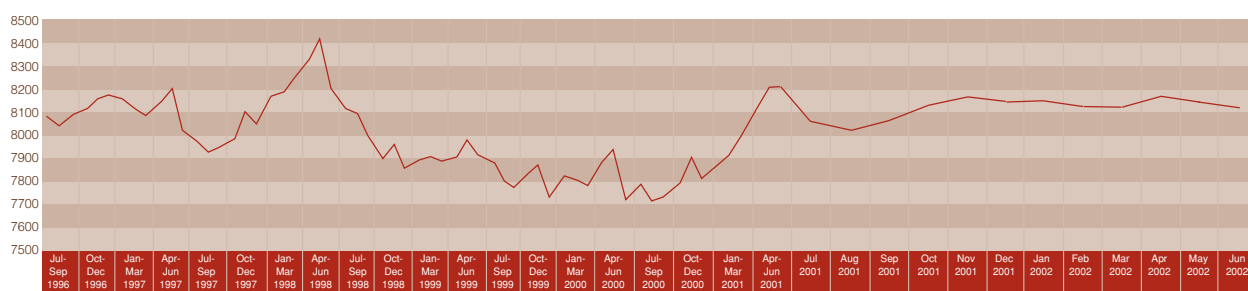
Abuse and neglect leave physical and emotional scars that may take a lifetime to heal.

Sadly, nationwide children in state care often suffer additional emotional wounds as the result of multiple placements in homes in which they feel like outsiders. For this and other obvious reasons, Washington State is dedicated to improving every child's sense of belonging, stability and security through a variety of permanent placement options including return to parents, adoption and guardianships.

There are growing numbers of children in care and they enter care with increasingly complex issues such as parental substance abuse and often coexisting mental illnesses, consequent prenatal exposure to substances, lack of extended family support systems and compounded economic pressures. Simultaneously, inadequate permanent placement options are available for those children facing the greatest challenges.

Within this very challenging context, the Children's Administration is committed to improving outcomes for this most vulnerable population.

Number of Children in Out-of-Home Care*



* Count of children in out-of-home care without a permanent plan completed, who remain in care for more than 60 days, excluding children in legal custody of tribes or private agencies.

Permanency objectives include:

- Increase permanency for children in out-of-home care
- Decrease length of stay without increasing re-entry
- Increase stability for children in out-of-home care
- Decrease over-representation of minority children in care
- Increase relative placements
- Preserve connections with parents, siblings, and other significant people

Eight different measures are currently used to monitor these objectives and gauge success in achieving permanency for children:

- Children returned to their parents, adopted, or placed in guardianships
- Length of time to achieve permanency goal of reunification
- Length of stay for children in care
- Children re-entering care
- Children with no more than two placements
- African American children in care longer than two years
- Children placed with extended family members
- Children visiting with their parents

A number of variables affect each outcome and the interrelated nature of these indicators of permanency must be considered in assessing the overall quality of a child's placement experience. Efforts to achieve shorter lengths of stay must be balanced with successful interventions with parents so that a child does not return home only to be placed again in out-of-home care. Foster parents must be adequately supported in the very difficult task of caring for troubled children so that children who must remain in care for longer periods can achieve stability and do not have to move from foster home to foster home.

Permanency

OBJECTIVE: Increase permanency for children in out-of-home care

Measured by: Children adopted

Despite the best of intentions and often valiant efforts by dedicated staff and struggling parents, there are times when reunification with the family of origin is simply not in the best interest of a specific child. In such a case, adoption is most often the preferred placement option as it is likely to be the most permanent and will serve as the placement alternative that provides children with the greatest sense of belonging.

The Children's Administration has placed an increased emphasis on finalizing adoptions for children who are legally free. Over the seven years reflected in this measure, 6,331 children have been adopted with 1,053 children adopted in FY 2002.

From 1996 through 2001, the number of adoptions increased over 100 percent. The Children's Administration was awarded an \$858,419 Federal Adoption Incentive Award for the increased number of adoptions in 2001.

In FY 2001, the Children's Administration achieved unparalleled success in securing adoptive homes for children. While the administration was unable to duplicate that level of accomplishment in FY 2002, the number of adoptions still exceeded all other previous years and continues an upward trend that represents an increase of more than 80 percent since FY 1996.

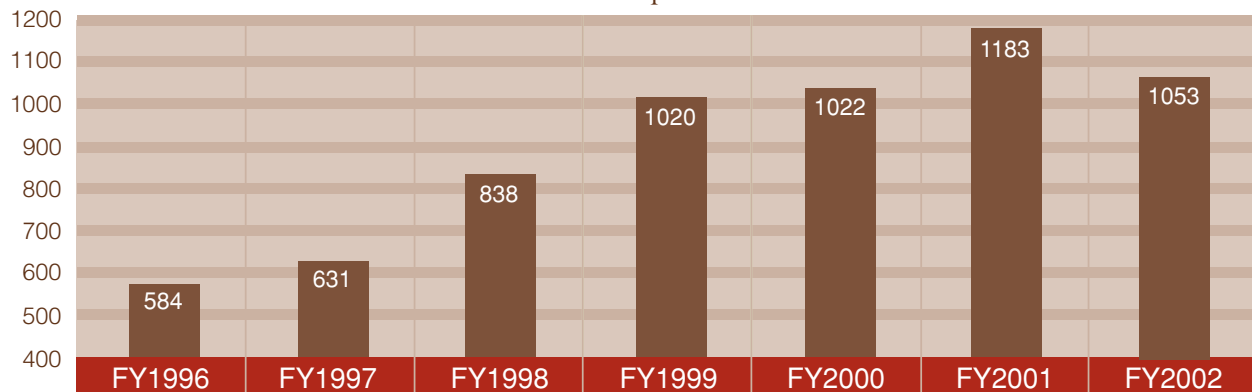
Federal law offering tax incentives will go into effect for parents adopting after January 2003. Potential adoptive parents have, in some cases, been advised to postpone finalizing adoptions in order to benefit from those incentives.

The Children's Administration continues to emphasize adoption for children who cannot return to their parents.

Initiatives Toward Success

- Creating an in-depth family home study that can be used for foster care, adoption and relative placements
- Revising and standardizing forms for adoption processes statewide
- Requiring prospective adoptive parents to attend pre-service training
- Monitoring legally free children available for adoption and communicating with the regions so that children do not languish in care
- Engaging in "child-specific" recruitment contract focusing on specialized recruitment efforts to find families for "hard-to-place" children

Adoptions*



* The number of children placed in out-of-home care with an accomplished permanent plan of adoption.

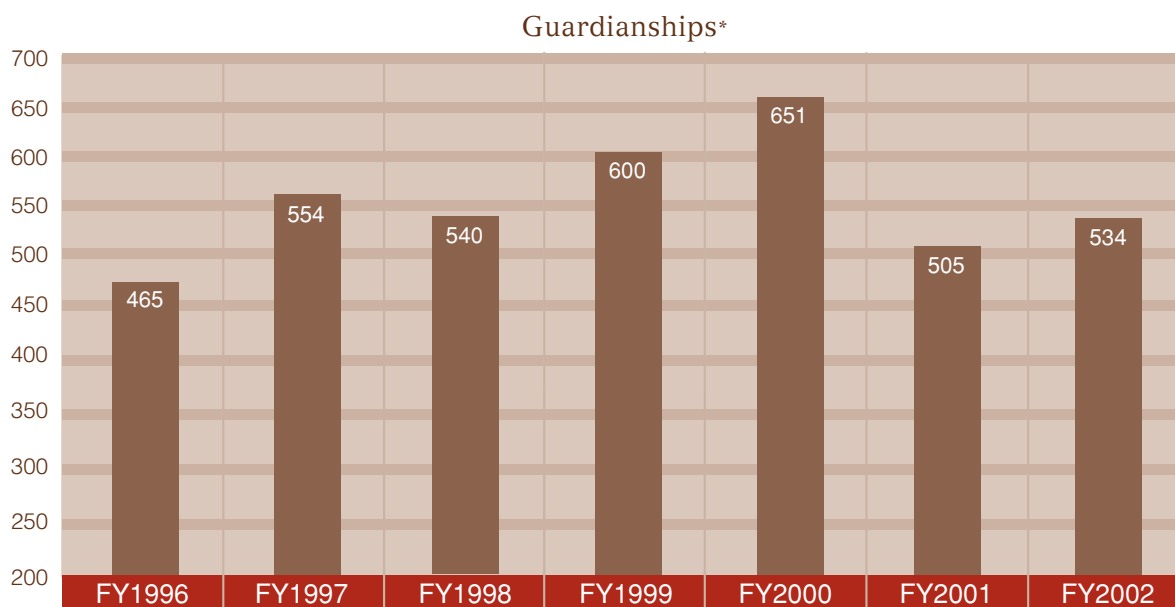
OBJECTIVE: Increase permanency for children in out-of-home care

Measured by: Children placed in guardianships

At times adoption is not the most appropriate option for specific children. In an effort to provide those children with a sense of permanency and stability, a “guardianship” placement may prove to be the permanency option that is in the best interest of the child.

Since guardianships offer a sense of family and are generally longer term placements than foster care, the Children’s Administration makes a concerted effort to finalize guardianships whenever it is in the best interest of the child.

From Fiscal Year 1996 through 2002, 3,843 guardianships were granted by either the Juvenile or Superior Court system. Following a drop in FY 2001, there was about a five percent increase in guardianship placements in Fiscal Year 2002.



* The number of children placed in out-of-home care with an accomplished permanent plan of placement in a guardianship arrangement granted through either the Superior Court or Juvenile Court system.



Permanency

OBJECTIVE: Increase permanency for children in out-of-home care

Measured by: Children returned to their parents (reunification)

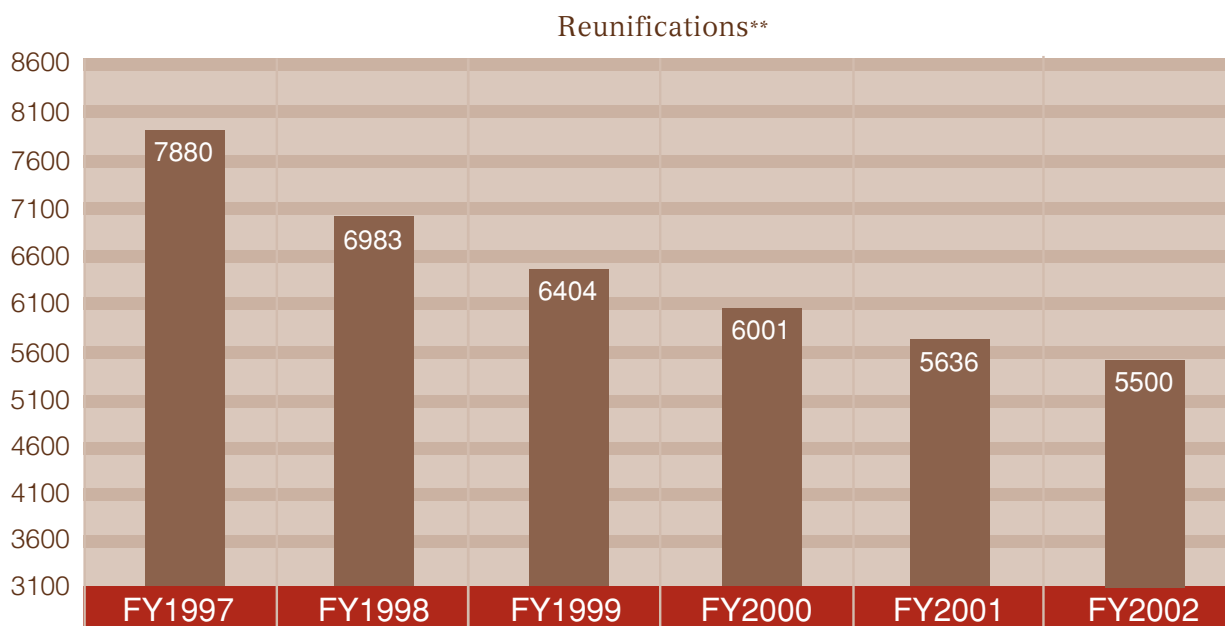
Washington State law mandates that a child be reunified with his or her parents or legal guardians when to do so is deemed safe and in the best interest of that child. Despite an emphasis upon pursuing reunification, the number of children reunified with their parents or guardians has continued to decrease over the past six years, a trend reflective of the larger national trend.

Children come into care today facing increasingly complex challenges, including relatively intractable parental substance abuse.

Reunification with a child's family of origin would, in many cases, return the child to an environment presenting substantial risk of re-abuse or neglect. The administration must carefully balance child safety concerns with the importance of family connections in considering any decision to return children to their parents.

Congruent with the Kids Come First Action Agenda, the Children's Administration continues to maintain child safety as its highest priority while pursuing reunification whenever appropriate. "Preservation of the family, and a permanent home, are very important to the well-being of the child and should be held as goals for the child protection effort. However, when interests compete, the endangered child is the primary person CPS is charged to protect."*

Anecdotal evidence seems to indicate that the decline in reunifications may also be related to the increasing number of parents who are allowing relatives to care for their children.



* Excerpted from "Principles of CPS", Kids Come First Action Agenda.

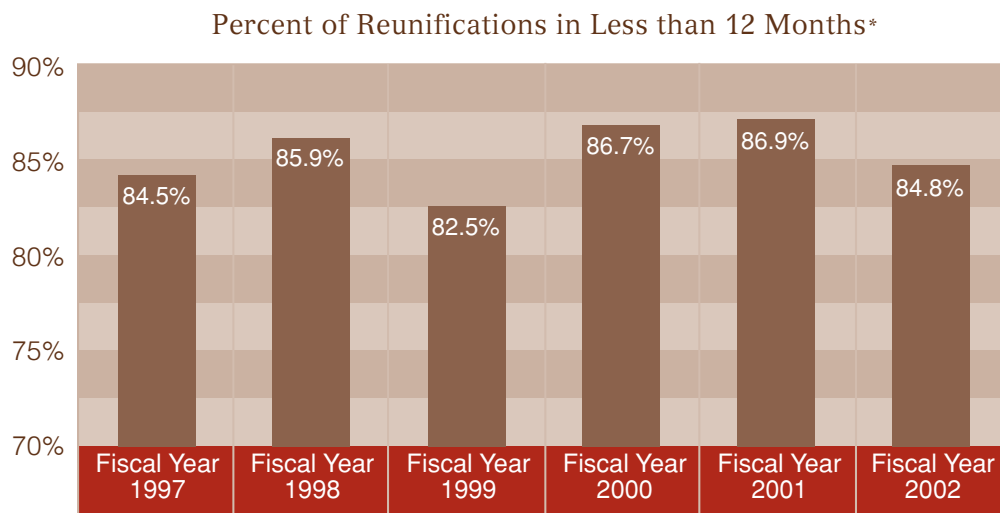
** Children placed in out-of-home care who were reunified with their parents during the fiscal year.

OBJECTIVE: Decrease length of stay without increasing re-entry

Measure: Length of time to achieve permanency goal of reunification

When reunification is possible, the Children's Administration is generally able to reunite the child with their parent within a year. Emphasis upon safety as well as the utilization of Intensive Family Preservation Services (IFPS) and Family Preservation Services (FPS), and other family support services has helped the Children's Administration achieve an 85 percent average rate of reunification within twelve-months over the past five years.

Children's Administration offers increased assistance to families through in-home services designed to prevent placement.



* Percent of children reunified with their parents within 12 months of placement in out-of-home care.

Permanency

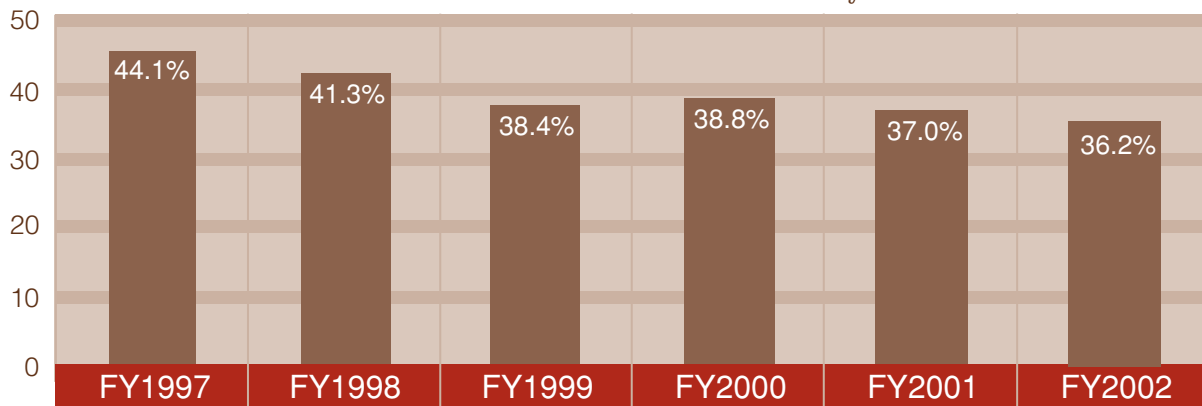
OBJECTIVE: Decrease length of stay without increasing re-entry

Measured by: Length of stay for children in care

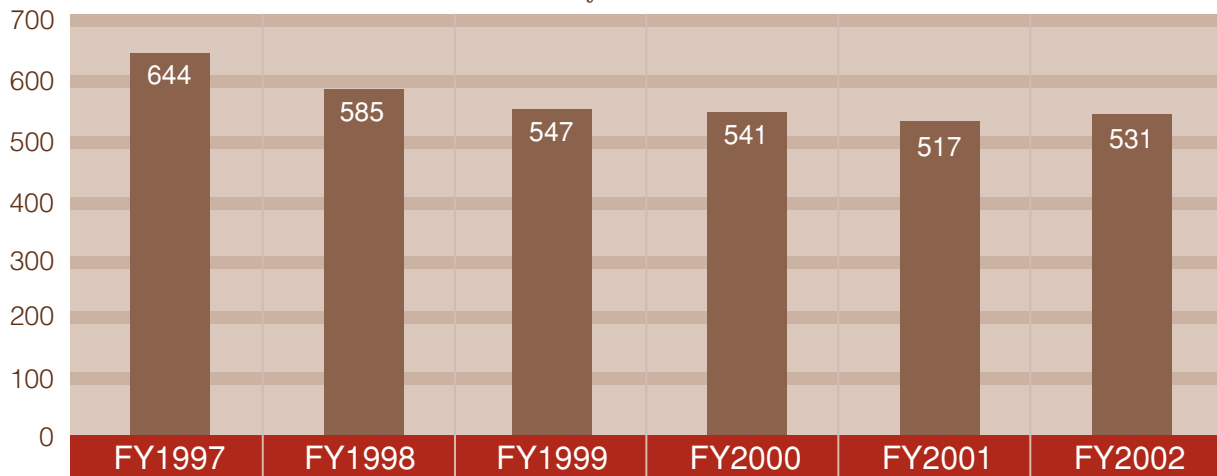
Placement in a permanent home is imperative to a child's well-being and should be accomplished as quickly as possible. The length of time in out-of-home care must be minimized as much as possible without placing that child at substantial risk for re-entry into out-of-home care. The Children's Administration recognizes that a reduction in the length of stay in an out-of-home placement may increase the potential of returning a child home before his/her family has acquired the skills and resources necessary to safely care for their child. For this reason, the Children's Administration tracks both length of time in care and the percent of children who must re-enter care.

The percent of children in care for more than two years has declined from 44 percent at the end of 1997 to 36.2 percent at the end of 2002. The median length of stay also demonstrated a significant decline over the same six year period with a slight increase demonstrated in the most recent fiscal year.

Percent of Children in Care More Than 60 Days
Who Have Been in Care More Than 2 years*



Median Number of Days Children are Placed in Care**



*Percent of all those children in DCFS custody currently in care for more than 60 days, who have a cumulative time in care during their current placement episode of greater than two years.

**Median cumulative time in care for all children in care for more than 60 days.

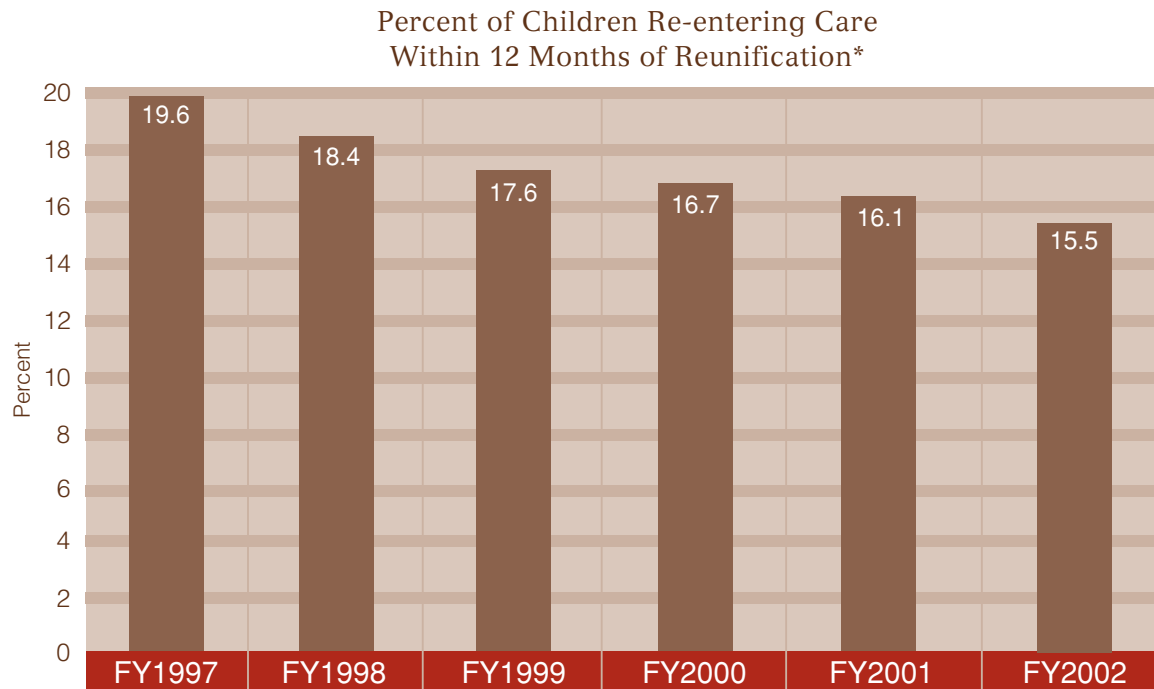
OBJECTIVE: Decrease length of stay without increasing re-entry

Measured by: Children re-entering care

The Children's Administration is charged with continually maintaining the balance between ensuring child safety and preserving meaningful family connections through reunification following the removal of a child from his or her home.

"Re-entry" measures the proportion of children who have been reunified with their parents and who are later returned to out-of-home care. Essentially, these are the children for whom reunification has failed.

Ultimately, children and their families are not well served if reunification occurs before the family is stabilized and the adults are able to safely parent their children. A reunification risk assessment, transition, and safety plan has been developed by the Children's Administration to assist social workers in the decision-making process about when and under what circumstances it is best to return children to their parents. These tools were implemented statewide between January and July 2002.



*Percent of children who re-enter out-of-home care within 12 months of reunification with their parents, regardless of length-of-stay

Permanency

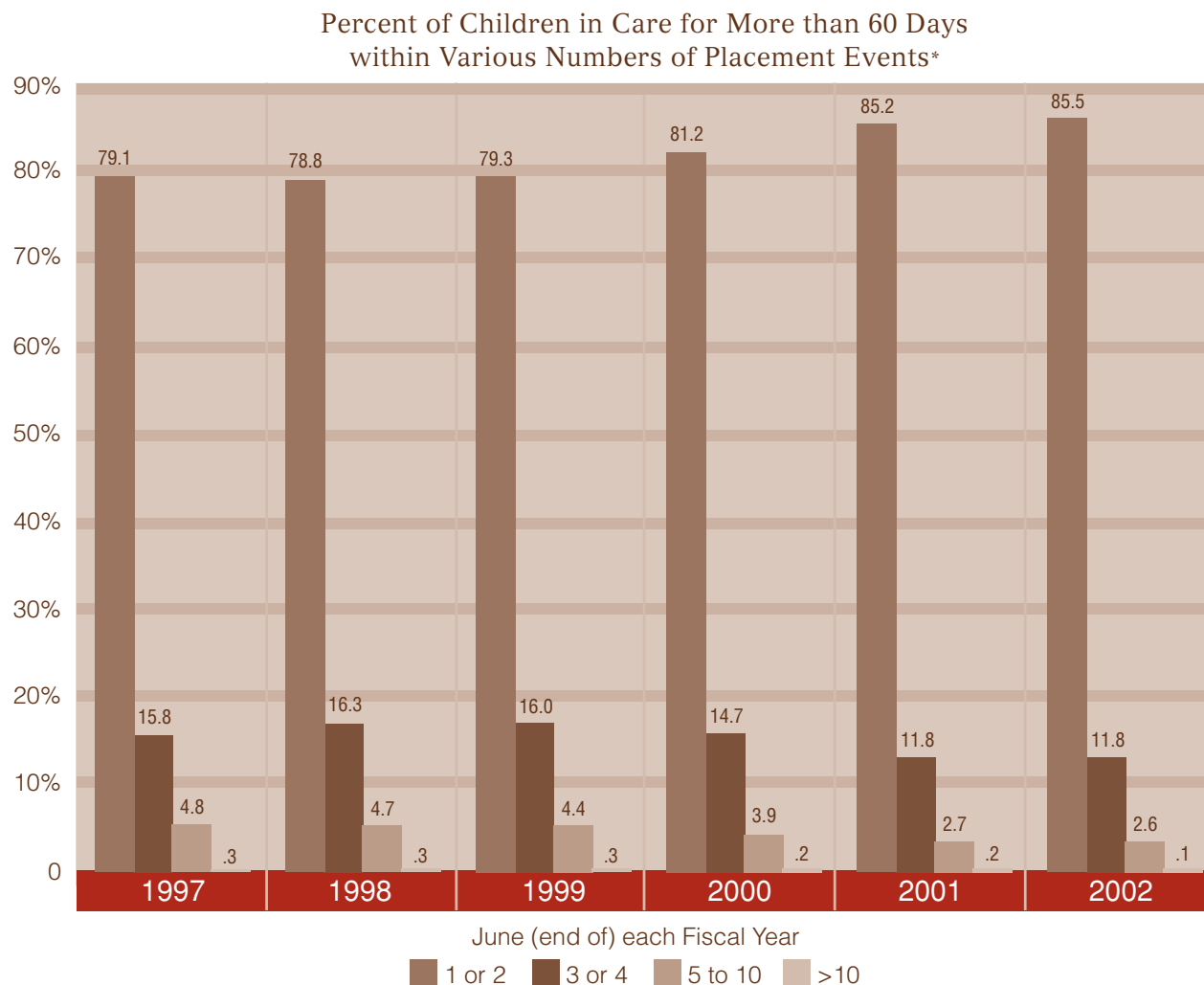
OBJECTIVE: Increase stability for children in out-of-home care

Measured by: Children with no more than two placements

Multiple placement changes in a child's life often precipitate a decrease in a child's sense of belonging, self-esteem and ultimately may jeopardize their future success.

In an effort to reduce placement changes, the administration tracks the number of times a child must move from home to home while he or she is in out-of-home placement.

Washington State has demonstrated gradual but consistent improvement in reducing the number of times a child must move and has shown a steady increase in the percent of children who have no more than two placements.



*The percent of children in DCFS custody who have only one or two principle places or homes of residence (placement events) during their first 12 months in care (or exiting from care within 12 months), excluding respite care, juvenile detention, hospital stays, on-the-run, and similar types of placements which do not represent a deliberate change of residence.

OBJECTIVE: Decrease over-representation of minority children in care

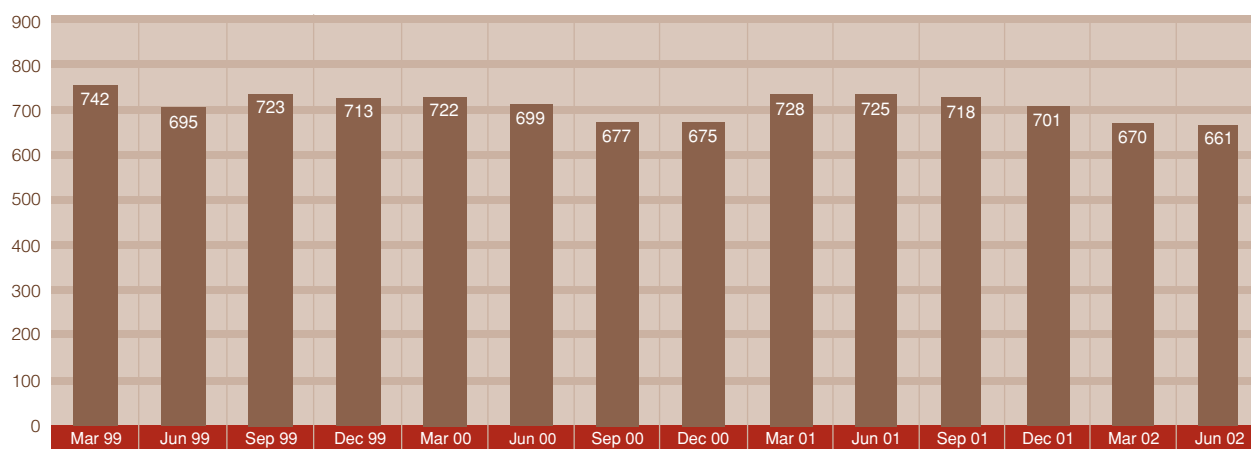
Measured by: African American children in care longer than two years

It is an unfortunate fact that minority children and, more specifically, African American children, are over-represented in foster care not only in Washington State but nationwide. Moreover, these children remain in care longer than their Caucasian counterparts.

The Children's Administration has made concerted efforts to balance this inequity and has worked to expediently ensure adequate safe and stable permanent homes for minority children placed in out-of-home care.

In Fiscal Year 2002, the Children's Administration demonstrated the lowest number of African American children in care for over two years since the administration began tracking the measure in 1999.

African-American Children in Care for More than 2 Years*



*The number of African-American children who have been placed in out-of-home care for two years or longer who are not in their permanent home.



Initiatives Toward Success

- Provision of culturally appropriate Family Preservation Services (FPS), as soon as possible
- Prognostic staffings conducted within the first 30 days of a child's placement to focus on long-range planning, with follow-up staffings as needed
- A Family Group Conference (FGC) is scheduled on or near the 30-day point of a child's out-of-home placement to identify and engage the family support system. Other types of family decision-making meetings are scheduled if needed
- Relative or kinship resources are actively sought for those children who must be placed in out-of-home care

Permanency

OBJECTIVE: Increase relative placements

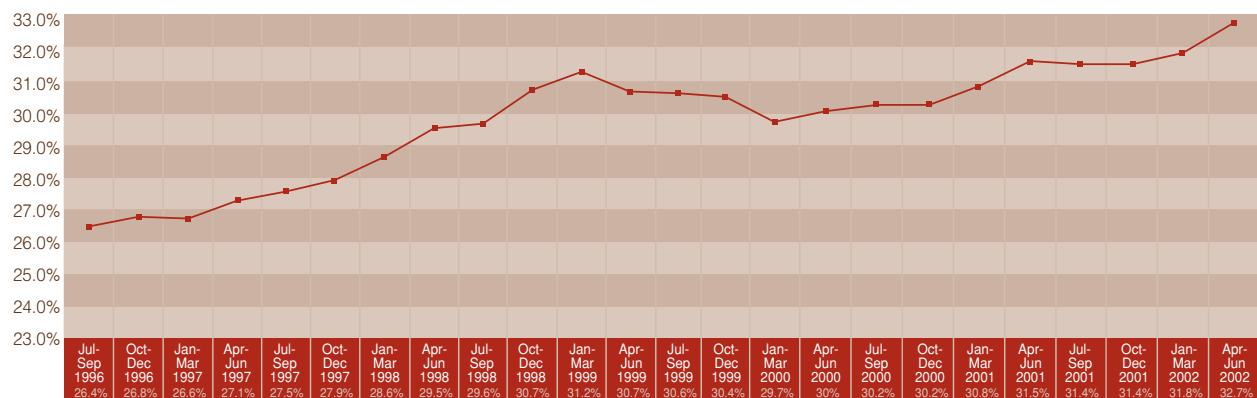
Measured by: Children placed with extended family members

“Familiarity,” “belonging,” “consistency,” “stability,” are all attributes of remaining within a family system that help to decrease the trauma when a child, through no fault of their own, must be removed from their own home.

For many children, Grandpa’s house or the home of a favorite aunt, or home of an adult sibling is very often a preferred placement option when compared to the prospect of being placed with a total stranger. Shared history alone helps a child maintain a sense of personal identity and connectedness to the only world he or she has known. Relative placements are also likely to serve as far more permanent placements than their unrelated foster home counterparts.

Over the course of the past six years, the Children’s Administration has implemented strategies to help families nurture children who might otherwise be lost to them, resulting in an upward trend in the number of children placed with relatives. Eligible relatives may receive some emergency financial support, assistance with childcare, medical assistance and other support services.

Percent of Children in Placement with Relatives*



*The number of children in placement with a relative “of specified degree” for at least 60 days, excluding guardianships, on the last day of the quarter with a placement type of licensed or unlicensed relative.



Permanency

OBJECTIVE: Preserve connections with parents, siblings, and other significant people

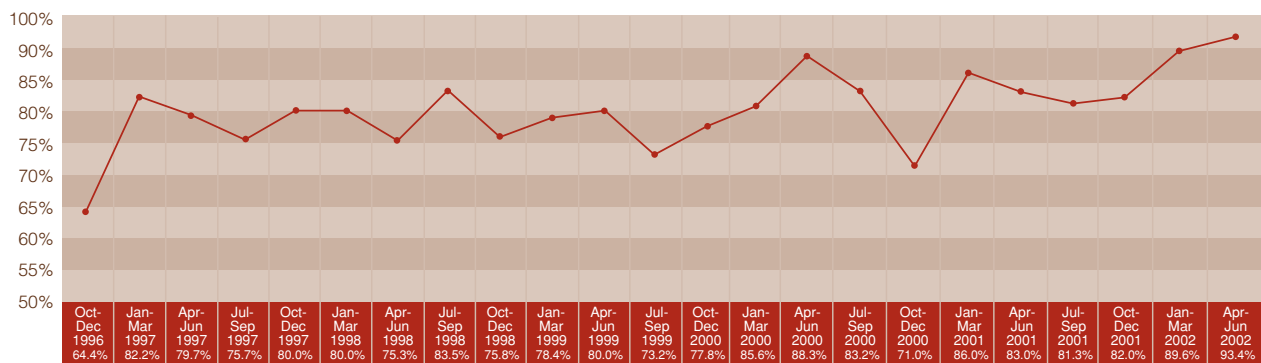
Measured by: Children visiting with their parents

Recognizing family strengths and building upon existing family ties is paramount for a child whose permanency plan is reunification. When it is in the best interest of a child, the Children's Administration encourages frequent visitation. The Children's Administration tracks visitation on a thirty-day cycle.

The statewide quarterly parent-child visitation rates have gradually increased over the past four years, currently up to 83 percent. It is important to note that it is not always appropriate or safe for children to visit with their parents regularly, so this performance measure will never reach 100 percent.



Parent/Permanent Caregiver and Child Visitations*



*Handcount of the percent of children with a permanent plan of reunification who visited with their parent or permanent caretaker at least once within the last 30 days of the quarter.